

Alicia's Home Coming

By
Cecilia A.
Loizeaux

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"It isn't even as if you needed to do this, Alicia," Bob Kendal held his voice to a cool, argumentative tone that made the girl before him still more indignant.

"Who are you that you should decide whether I need to do anything at all? she blazed indignantly.

"I am your fiance, and"—he was beginning when she interrupted him.

"If that is your excuse for such unjust interference with my wishes, I can at least relieve you of your duty." And she placed her engagement ring on the table between them. The young man glanced at it without seeming to see it. Then he looked sharply at the angry girl who was drawn to her full height.

"Alicia," he said gently, "you are too angry to realize what you are doing. Put the ring on your finger again. You don't mean this."

"Pardon me, I do mean it," said the girl icily.

The young man's face whitened, and a hurt look sprang into his steady brown eyes. Then he straightened up and squared his shoulders and set his strong chin firmly. When he spoke there was a note of hardness in his voice which the girl had never heard from him before and from which she shrank mentally.

"Alicia, do you realize what you are doing? We were to be married in May. Your trousseau is begun, I know. And you've given me every reason to believe you cared for me as much as I do for you. And now, because I ask you to do this one thing—for your sake as well as mine—you are going to give all this up?"

The girl turned suddenly and went to the window, where she stood looking out into the dripping garden. She felt her lips quivering, and she must not let Bob see.

Bob looked at the crown of dark red hair against the deep green of the window draperies, and his voice softened.

"This is all I've ever asked of you, Alicia. I've been too confident of your love for me after you confessed it; I've believed in you too utterly ever to be jealous of your flirtations, as many another man would have been—and rightly too. I've submitted cheerfully to being 'trailed' in public because it was you who did the trailing."

Alicia turned and faced him again, her foot tapping the floor impatiently.

"Is the list of your virtues a long one, sir?" she asked.

"I shall not name them all," he answered calmly. "The only thing I've ever insisted upon your doing is this one we're talking about. Give up this silly concert tour. I've never said a word when you've sung for sweet charity's sake or for any society affair, even when the publicity of the events has often made me wince. This time you haven't any real reason. You are not in need of money, and you're not doing it for charity. It isn't even the necessary ambition of the professional to win a higher place for herself. You will get flattery from the critics who do not think it worth the effort to spend real criticism on society amateurs. If they should criticize you honestly—the way they do professionals, to whom it means bread and butter—you'd see the point I'm trying to make. I appreciate the charm of you and your voice no one else who looks and listens to you possibly can, and, Alicia Fairall, I don't want to see you 'damned with faint praise' or humiliated by any conscientious critic. Can't you see that?"

"When you are quite through," interrupted Alicia, "you can doubtless find your way out. I must ask you to excuse me." And she swept from the room, pausing once in the curtained doorway as if to speak.

Unconsciously she assumed a theatrical attitude. Her face was turned back over her shoulder, and her lips were parted a little. With her glowing head and her soft green dress between the heavier green of the curtains she looked like a tall, beautiful dahlia, and Bob involuntarily started forward. But she closed her lips to a thin red line and went on dropping the curtains behind her. Presently he heard the tapping of her slippers upon the stairs and then the bang of a door.

He did not leave the house at once, but stood at the window where Alicia had stood and looked out into the gray twilight. It was early spring. As he looked wearily at the sparrows on the soaked lawn Bob felt his throat tighten and brushed his hand across his eyes.

"She couldn't mean it," he muttered as he turned and picked up the emerald ring and slipped it into his vest pocket. "It is too close to May for her to mean that." Then he sought for paper and pen and sat down at the table. He wrote:

Dear, if I have been too harsh forgive me. I have said too strongly, perhaps, what I believe to be true, and all I want is to spare both of us the pain any failure of yours would be sure to cause. Think it over well, dear, before you decide. What I came to tell you today is that our house is all done. The last workman has left. I am enclosing a key—there are only two—and I beg you will go there and think it all over at least once before you decide finally.

He folded the key and on his way put landed the envelope to the butler to "be taken up to Miss Alicia."

As for Alicia, she had gone straight to her desk and had written the following note:

My Dear Mr. Courtenay—I have decided, as I promised I would by today, about the concert tour. You may depend upon

me for your soprano. And as I have been the only one to object to the longer trip you planned I withdraw my objections to that also. Under your management I feel sure we shall be successful. Sincerely,
ALICIA LEE FAIRALL.

When she had heard the closing of the outer door she gave the note to the butler and took from him the envelope Bob had left. With it in her hand she went slowly upstairs and sat down before her grate fire. She felt her anger melting away, and by the ache in her throat knew that tears were not far off. She tore open the envelope, hoping to find some stimulus to her indignation, but at the gentle press of the words and the sight of the key to the home she and Bob had so eagerly, carefully planned the tears came with a rush, and, burying her face in the arm of her easy chair, she tried herself to sleep.

From notices of "a concert to be given in the near future by the best amateur talent the city afforded" began to be frequent during the next few weeks. Then came the programme and pictures of the principals. Alicia was often mentioned, and one Sunday paper contained her picture, a theatrically posed, full length affair, with her head over one shoulder and her lips as if speaking. Bob's heart sank and turned sick. She did mean it, then.

As the time drew near he thought he would go to the concert, and when the night finally came he dressed early and fidgeted miserably till time to start. Then, suddenly changing his mind, he had himself driven to the door of the little new home he and Alicia had planned together. Bob let himself into the house with his key, which he always carried, and walked through the empty, desolate rooms, which by now should have been furnished and ready for the bride's home coming. He roamed clear through the house, drawing the shades and lighting all the chandeliers till every room was blazing with light. Then he turned them all out and lit a blazing fire in the dining room grate, and, sitting down on the high settee built into the niche by the fireplace, he closed his eyes and deliberately conjured up the presence of Alicia.

He was almost asleep when he heard the front door open and close and the click of high heeled slippers on the bare floors, accompanied by the unmistakable swish of a woman's silken skirts. Then he heard a match scratched and an impatient exclamation as something was dropped. Then, with his heart pounding violently, he laid his head back against the settee and feigned sleep.

He heard the steps come to the dining room door, heard Alicia's voice say "Oh!" in frightened, breathless surprise, felt his heart beat almost to suffocation, and then he heard the steps recede with a rush to the hall and the front door open. He was about to call to her when he heard her say to some one on the porch:

"Tell Mr. Courtenay I am sick or dead or buried—anything you like only that I shall not sing tonight." Then the door closed again and Bob immediately went to sleep. It seemed to be a very sound sleep, for he did not open his eyes, though Alicia coughed three times. But when she could stand it no longer and shook his shoulder he woke up with a most excellent look of surprise on his face.

"Is it too late?" she asked breathlessly.

Looking at her as if dazed, he pulled out his watch.

"Oh, I don't mean for the concert! I mean"—but Alicia could get no further, and, dropping to her knees beside the settee, she leaned her head against his arm and cried.

"I guess it isn't too late for a wedding," said Bob, "but we'll have to hurry."

The Sunflower and Its Uses.

The sunflower is a native of America. In 1569 it was introduced into Europe and is now extensively cultivated there, particularly in Russia, where it is grown principally for the oil contained in its seed. The seeds after the shells are removed contain 34 per cent of oil. This oil is clear, light yellow, nearly odorless and of a peculiar pleasant and mild taste. It is said to be superior to both almond and olive oil for table purposes and is used in making soap and candles. In Russia the larger seeds are sold in immense quantities to the lower classes of the people, who eat the kernels as we do peanuts. The stalks furnish a valuable fertilizer, while the green leaves are dried, pulverized and mixed with meal as food for cows. The stalk produces an excellent flavor. It is said that Chinese silk goods commonly contain more or less sunflower fiber. The so called Niger seed oil is made from a species of sunflower family which is a native of Abyssinia. It furnishes the common lamp oil of upper India, where it is largely cultivated.

Bay Tree Beliefs.

Long before the time of Shakespeare the bay tree was an object of superstition. The withering of such a tree was believed to be a sure indication of coming misfortune to those with whom it was in any way connected. Shakespeare gave voice to the superstition in "Richard II." when he made one of his characters say:

"Tis thought the king is dead; we'll not stay." The bay trees in our country are withered.

It was thought by the ancients that lightning would never harm this tree, and it was customary among them to carry bay leaves as a charm against the thunderbolts of Jove. The same belief was long prevalent in England, and reference to it may be found in an old poem dedicated to Ben Jonson: I see that wreath which doth the weaver's arm.

Against the quick strokes of thunder is no charm To keep off death's pale dart.

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